Movement lesson

Angela 2 — Week 3, Day 3, Session 2 — 37 minutes

Summary: Russell answers a question about teachings that distrust pleasure and the self, then leads a standing lesson: breath descending as the arms rise, the head long, and reaching upward while rooted in the earth. Sharing turns toward integration, grace, doing as oneself rather than to oneself, and how to meet the pressure of right and wrong.

Pleasure and trust

[Russell:] So I was thinking a little bit about your question from that quote, and I realized that it really annoys me, that kind of teaching — not because it's wrong, but because it can create kinds of responses like you're having. It's almost like people have some post-traumatic stress from dealing with a demand, or a picture of what one is supposed to be.

I respect — For those who don't know what I'm talking about, that's okay. I'm just responding to Aaron's from yesterday. I don't want to go into the whole background.

There is really an accuracy in my sense that a teacher be very concerned about the students being lost in pleasure. Pleasure is not liberating. Pleasure is wonderful when it's in harmony with the organism, but as a direction of life, it is not liberating.

We will create suffering if we get addicted to having everything be the way we want it to be. And that part of Gautama Buddha's teaching I so value, because I see the part of me that always wants things better, and always wants things just the way I want them. And always wants the temperature just right, and all that stuff, right?

We build a whole world that, even when it's just the way we want it to be, is very short-lived. So even when we're successful, there's a sense of almost anxiety, because we know that ice cream cone is almost gone. If we base our life in that, we will suffer. That essential insight is so important for us to get. If we don't get that, we will be chasing the tail forever.

So I value that part of it. But to then bring that into the kinds of language that I hear so often from teachers that I'm sure have great insight and wisdom — where it becomes, don't trust yourself. When you feel that something is good, it's bad. And this whole kind of thing creates this. I've had so many people come to me almost shaking inside with, what can I trust?

Maybe that strategy is effective in a monastic setting. I'm not sure. I don't know that. But it sure brings up a strong response in me when I see the effects on people.

That's what came to me last.

Bruno is waiting for the results of tests. Everything so far has been okay. And as he said: I am okay, Russell. What can one do but live with it? So I am being with it. It is okay.

Thank you, Bruno.

Yes, Valerie is with him. Right, yeah, I asked her about that, and she — thank you, thank you, Wendy. She feels right.

Thank you, Wendy. I'll let you know. They were expecting to be back soon. So we'll see if this goes on in any unexpected way.

[Participant:] Wanted to say that you had asked us to remind you yesterday, something about how in the movement it benefited health.

[Russell:] Oh, great. Yeah. Okay. So when we get to parasympathetic, yeah. When we get to the movement lesson today, remind me, remind me, remind me again. I'm not doing that.

Let's stand.

Thank you for reminding me. Now I remind you to remind me again.

Standing

[Russell:] Sensing the standing.

If it fits for you, that picture of breathing as if the air comes down from above, almost like a radiance, a blessing, a gift from above, comes through you into the earth.

Exhaling up and out, feeling the exhale actually having a slight lengthening. It's a subtle thing, because the lengthening — it's not like you're lifting or anything. It's just this image that we don't get shorter when we exhale.

There'll be some softness in the knees and ankles.

Inhaling, lift your arms, but think downward with the breath. So you've got two directions. The upwardness of the arms radiating upward, and the breath coming down through you. And then you lower the arms, feel the arms coming down, and the breath traveling.

We want this up and down to live simultaneously. In some ways it might feel more natural to inhale going up and thinking up, but to have both directions at the same time might be helpful. So that's the experiment here.

The sense is, the inhale is coming down through your skull into the earth, and then up with the exhale. Your arms are lifting with that inhale.

Radiating and receiving.

[Silence 34 seconds]

Now, just bring the right foot forward.

Sense from your golden ball, just a movement forward over that right foot. You can let the back heel lift, if that feels right. If you prefer to keep it down, it's okay. And then coming back, the feeling of the front heel lifting.

See if you feel a difference. If you lift the toes of the front foot, feel how it throws you back. Center of gravity back a little further. Whereas if you come over that back foot and you lift the heel, you can stay over that foot a little bit easier. See if that's true for you.

Hands down, but think as if you're moving from that middle space.

Feeling of the earth, and the length from the top of the head. We want to be aware of dropping the head.

The head

[Russell:] This habit of dropping the head is so key for so many people, especially aging people. Well, we're all aging people. Especially people, let's say, over sixty, sixty-five, seventy, where the fear of falling begins to grow more and more.

And this position of the head, held long enough, is such a draw towards depression. It's such a somatic draw, because the chest tends to drop. I'm looking down, I'm feeling down, I get downward, I get heavier.

Almost everybody I work with who's had a stroke, or had a bad fall, tends to get their eyes wedded to the ground. It's almost always a central part of bringing them back into their life — lifting the head.

So as we're practicing, it's really helpful to have this sense of the length through the top of your head, that feeling of height. And learning to sense the ground through your feet, and through your body awareness, so that you have a sense of space that doesn't require you locking your eyes into the ground.

[Participant:] It's a shame response.

[Russell:] Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's true.

So I use the example of people who are injured, but it's true of all of us that we can benefit from being aware of that.

Okay, now as we go forward, let's lift. And you can just breathe here. Just settle in over this front foot.

The back heel is lightly lifted. The knee's not locked, but feels supportive. The feeling of the length of your spine, the upwardness towards the sky, and downward into the earth, and coming back.

Lifting the front heel, radiating through your fingertips into the earth, through your left foot into the earth, but still having that upwardness through the spine, through the neck, through the top of the head.

This time let's connect it to the breath, inhaling as we go forward, thinking down with the breath as we move up with the arms.

[Silence 39 seconds]

The feeling of the whole movement. Because it's less important, the details — if I lift the toes — more important to get the feeling of that up and down, and connecting beyond the physical body, or through the physical body, into space.

As you go forward, inhale. And even if it fits for you, imagine this breath coming into you really as a gift, as a radiance, as a blessing, as if something is carried in that air. Not only the oxygen that feeds us, but that we are connected to this world.

Feeling of something outside of us radiating towards us.

Stand on both feet for a moment.

Close your eyes. If that's okay for your balance.

Breath down toward, condensing toward the floor of your pelvis.

Sense some feeling of the bodily boundary. Some sense of the space right around your body. Then extending out as far as you can, let yourself feel connected into the space above and below, particularly right now.

Bring the left foot forward.

And this time, everything's the same except look upward beyond where your hands are pointing. And when we lower down, we just look to the horizon.

Still thinking up and down.

For us, it's allowing in the felt sense of the gesture — what it feels like to look up, to reach up, and be connected downward.

[Silence 53 seconds]

What you notice

[Russell:] Any words for what goes on inside?

And any parts of it that feel uncomfortable, or feel wonderful, or different ways that you go forward and you're thinking in these different directions?

[Participant:] I found something that you said last time has been really helpful for me. I'm going to imagine that — downward with the inhales.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant:] The actual little bit of downward motion that happens with the diaphragm, right? There actually is that downward motion with the inhale, and the expansion of the diaphragm upward. And actually remembering and connecting with it really helps. It feels more like the right way to do it.

[Russell:] You get some feeling of a physical correlate to it, yeah.

[Participant:] Yeah. This is what's actually happening in there.

[Russell:] Yeah. Nice, nice. So the downward movement of the diaphragm with the inhale. Upward draw with the exhale.

[Participant:] Inward pull that opens the love.

[Russell:] Something else, yes. Oh, receive.

Who else felt something in lifting the head like that?

Very, very often, if you look throughout many different cultures, the artistic representation of saints in ecstasy, or shamans in connection with something larger and outside — many different cultures. Even earth cultures have this inspiration, and are receiving.

I'm not here to cultivate belief systems, but our body gives us a means for connecting with a larger body. This is my invitation for your experiment.

Is it true that something begins to happen in this — that different gestures bring different qualities, and that as we experience more permeability, the sense of self really begins to shift?

[Participant:] My head, the second time — my eyes went back also. That was a whole different feeling in my body.

[Russell:] Yes, yes. We want the eyes, we want the head, we want the arms lifted, that whole thing. And the arms lifting are not — let's see if you can see the difference between this, this, and this movement.

Yes, thank you.

[Participant:] It's more integrated. The flow is more integrated.

[Russell:] More integrated.

And what's happening is, in this case, my arms are coming out of my pelvis. These arms are literally, muscularly connected all the way down here, those long latissimi. And if we lift the arms without that connection, it's a totally different experience than when the arms are lifted from the golden ball going forward.

See if you can feel that difference. You can very well lift your arms without this. You can lift your head and eyes, but feel — do you get a different inner sense? Do you feel it?

[Participant:] There's a oneness. There's a flow. Supported. Connection to the ground all the way up.

[Russell:] Yes. Connection.

And can you get a feeling — I feel passionate about this right now — that when people have this arm separate from the rest of the self, there really is a feeling of isolation, of self, of separation. Like, I've got to lift my arms, no one else is going to do it. Somehow when I get here, I go — there's more participating, not just me. The earth helps. It's just lighter.

I mean, the arms — yeah, you have to come down.

[Participant:] Graceful. It's just your feet. You're just so graceful.

[Russell:] Yeah, graceful. And we get that connection of grace and graceful. We feel the grace. We are graced.

[Participant:] When we did it before, I lost my balance, with my left foot forward. And now I have perfect balance.

[Russell:] Yeah. Now you've got it coming all the way through. And grace descends and ascends.

[Participant:] Feels like doing something as myself instead of to myself.

[Russell:] Oh, nice language. As rather than to.

[Participant:] What did you say after me?

[Participant:] The integrated gesture feels like doing something as myself, whereas that kind of lifting the arms feels like doing something to myself.

[Russell:] Isn't that nice? Isn't that nice?

I want to pause there for just a second, because that feels so important to me. The distinction Aaron's making there for us. The as.

As, not to

[Russell:] Most of us, because of our language system and the whole relationship to the body, we've been taught that we up here control it down here. And we do things to it, and we're supposed to control it and do things to it. And there is this sense of doing to, so often.

And I love that language, the as. That sense of wholeness, that it's not this separate.

Something so important.

[Participant:] I was just going to say, when it's integrated for me, I feel alive. And when I'm just lifting my arms, there's a dead feeling.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant:] There's a real connection with the lungs in that movement. When I just do my arms, my arms are kind of held there.

[Russell:] Yes.

[Participant:] Even though I do a lot of work with yoga and stuff, the first few times I'm like, oh, I don't have the right balance. And I was realizing, if I were a child, that would be inspiring to me. It would be fun. As a grown-up, there's a caution about not being —

I don't know why. If I were five, I would actually have fun with finding the steadiness, and the creativity, the connection. But as a grown-up, careful, watching something. Just that whole shift, as you were talking about, as we get older, that carefulness.

[Russell:] It's not that we shouldn't be observant, but there's a certain kind of fun that we can create with the little bits of unsteadiness that we might discover.

[Participant:] Yeah.

[Russell:] And as you say that, I think of how, as that five-year-old, part of that play is less need for controlling everything, isn't it?

[Participant:] Yeah, that's a good point.

[Russell:] And that touches so many different levels. The playfulness we can have, and then the seriousness is connected to being in control. Not letting the surprises happen. It's dangerous.

[Participant:] First grade.

[Participant:] I'm giving myself permission to sway, naturally sway, and find my standing still out of the sway, and still be swaying. Nobody's perfect. We're not statues.

[Russell:] Right.

[Participant:] Embracing myself. And this has so much to do with balance, right?

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant:] When you let them know that embracing themselves, you're more prone to fall. So you kind of encourage the sway. As a given.

[Russell:] Right. And this beautiful metaphor — to brace yourself against your life, you're more likely to fall.

[Participant:] We're in this reaching place — reaching into the sky, this beautiful sky, connected to the earth, but then falling through the earth. So it was this sensation of falling, like free fall. Very grounded and humbling.

[Participant:] I had something with the reaching as well. When I went up like this, but then when I extended myself, when I really reached up, I felt this tingly openness moving down my arms. So it was lifting up, and then tingly — it was almost an opening. It opened up from my hands all the way down into my shoulders.

[Participant:] So when you first asked the question, what came through my mind was: good or bad, it feels suffocating and confusing.

[Russell:] What feels suffocating?

[Participant:] The movement. When you combine it with the breath, when you combine it with the eyes, the arms, I start feeling flooded.

And it's sort of like what you were speaking to, about right and wrong. The suffocation is, I need to move faster. If I'm going to time it with my breath, I'm holding my breath, and then there's a point where I just — you know?

So if I were able to do it on my own time, I think. But I feel like, no, you need to stay with the guru. And that's the right way, and you'll get it.

[Russell:] Yeah, yeah. Great, thank you.

So I have some encouragements for you. I'll start there.

[Participant:] Yeah, I found that if I were going to a raising — right — my breath ran out by the time you went to come down, because we're talking. I have to take a couple of breaths up there.

[Russell:] Yes.

[Participant:] Otherwise I was trying to hold my breath, and that was very uncomfortable.

[Russell:] Okay, good.

[Participant:] And I'm trying to think of the ocean. It's such an opposite movement for me. The ocean going out, you're taking it in.

The thread

[Russell:] Okay, so a couple of things.

One is, I very much encourage you to open to the questions of right and wrong, as a really valuable line of inquiry. How do I relate to this right and wrong? Can I have permission? Do I want permission?

It's not a question of always doing what you want, or always doing what's being asked, but investigating how to be in this situation when that's coming up.

Not while you're doing that.

Second suggestion: drop the stuff that feels like too much. Ignore the teacher.

Take for yourself. Try it all, and go, oh, this is feeling suffocating right now. How could I be in this situation in a way where I could feel kind of close to what's happening around me, but also honoring what's going on within me? Is there a way I can navigate like that? Maybe yes, maybe no.

Because this is life, right? Sometimes we're in situations where the beings around us are needing something different than we are needing, and we are navigating.

Some of us are really good at giving up our own inner listening. We listen to the other, we listen to the other, we listen to the other, and then we either freak out or we do something extreme, because we haven't listened for a long time.

Some of us are really good at ignoring others and paying attention to our own needs, and listening, listening, listening, and then some kind of disconnection will happen in our environment.

So we're all working with this. Sometimes it's harmonious, where what we need and want is what our environment needs and wants. But my experience is that it's often not.

So these are the kinds of inquiries one can have — not while you're doing it, later. But while you're doing it, say, okay, could I give myself permission to go faster? Let me see how it feels to be out of harmony with the group. What comes up?

Or let me see, is it possible that there's a difference between holding my breath and pausing in my breath? Can I have a kind of pausing that doesn't feel suffocating? Maybe yes, maybe no.

So there's so much that's rich when something comes clearly to you. I'm so grateful that you could sense it, articulate it, and now it becomes a fruitful territory.

Because I promise you, anything that comes strongly during a movement practice — you could pull on that thread and touch every bit of your life. It would be a thread that would touch into your relationships, would touch into how you've been with your parents, and how you are with your dog. Because we are ourselves, and what comes up for us, if we can treat it with respect and some humor and some interest, we will reveal ourselves to ourselves.

Suzuki Roshi said, beautifully, the opposite of what Sigmund Freud said, probably. Suzuki Roshi said, nothing is hidden.

And what that means is, if we can find a way to pull the thread — the thread being what's there — and not judge it, not push it, it will lead you to yourself.

Let's come together over here. Thank you for that.